

# Table



# Time

By Sandy Rogers, photos by Laura Tsuk

In the olden days every dog loved the table—you couldn't keep them off the obstacle. In fact, table sucking began years ahead of tunnel sucking. The dogs loved the table because we brainwashed them to seek out the table in exchange for riches beyond their wildest dreams (high rate of high-value reinforcement). The only game in town used to be USDAA and almost every gamble ended with a table, no sit or down position required. Training sessions often focused on hitting the table and having a delicious snack or fabulous game there.

So now you have the recipe for teaching terrific tables: make your dog love the table; do a total brainwash. Prove to your dog that the table is a sacred, happy place where only love awaits, where nothing bad will ever happen. This training is not just to encourage fast performance; it is to keep the dog from resenting the table. Table resentment is a demon that is hard to exorcise.

So, you're thinking, nothing bad has ever happened to your dog on the table—why wouldn't he already love it? Ask yourself whether your dog has ever

- ▶ Been corrected for sliding off: Dogs that have a bit more gas in the tank when they are at a trial often have not had the luxury of “anti-slide-off training.”
- ▶ Been told he was wrong about his position: Many dogs with table troubles don't have a strong understanding of sit and down commands when on the move.
- ▶ Been told he got up too soon: Lots of table haters don't have the important fundamentals of good stay work.
- ▶ Had to stop running when he got to the table: Gotcha! I think all dogs that love to run already have a beef when there is a break in the action. That break in itself should be enough to increase your motivation to fatten up the “you will (if it's the last thing I do) love the table” account.

Now that you understand why your dog might not love the table, let's look at some specific training goals and ideas for each part of the table performance that needs to be trained. One word of caution before you begin: Table trouble can also be a sign of physical

discomfort. I had a dog with a neck strain that did not show on the A-frame or weaves, but he could not jump onto the table. The mechanics of jumping on the table are different from those of any other obstacle. Refusing any single obstacle can be reason enough for getting an orthopedic evaluation.

## Anti-slide-off Training

Anti-slide-off training (ASO) is part of the “you will love the table” brainwashing plan. It is a game—a game of skill and timing. Don't tell the dog, but you will be artfully manipulating the outcome of the game.

### What you need:

- ▶ A table (preferably adjustable) with the surface that your dog will see in competition
- ▶ A dog that loves toys or treats, or that is really hungry
- ▶ A dog that understands restraint games (see sidebar)
- ▶ At least 50' of space, 70' is better
- ▶ Lots of energy

### The three drills for ASO training are simple:

- ▶ Send
- ▶ Recall
- ▶ Run-by

All three drills end with a big party on the table, but only if the dog *sticks* the table. If he falls, jumps, or slides off, *do not* put him back on the table to reward him. This game is all or nothing.

Drills should not include a sit or a down until those positions are perfected away from the

table, and then the added position is practiced only occasionally. You can use the drills throughout the dog's career when you need to refresh his memory of his table job.

### ASO Training: Send

Place a toy or treat on the far side of the table, away from you. If you use food (a toy is better, but use food if the dog doesn't love toys) be sure it is easily visible. If the dog has to sniff around on the table to find the treat, it isn't visible enough. Move away from the table until there is about 10' between the dog and obstacle. This is where the art of restraint comes in. You hold the dog back by the collar or shoulders, and then rev him up and make him crazy (soft whispering will excite the softer dog better). Next you send him to his toy or treat on the table. You stay where you are until the dog hits the table, and then drive in behind him to have a big party on the table.

When I let go I use the command *Table*, but only after the game is in the dog's head. You can start by using your command for a sendaway.



Notice the position of the toy on the far side of the table (away from the handler) during this send.



*Teach the dog to drop sphinx style, or elbows first rather than rear end first. This is required for braking on the table and for efficiency.*



*Because the dog's weight is so far forward, he can't "hold on" to the table. He must be able to shift his weight back. This is why the sphinx or elbows first down is so important.*

### Send Training Tips

- ▶ If the dog's speed is causing failure, decrease his momentum by shortening the distance between your dog and the table so the dog is successful. Then gradually increase the send distance.
- ▶ If your dog is still sliding off after you have taken out the momentum, put the table 6' from a wall or fence. With success, gradually increase the send distance and then move the table away from the wall or fence.
- ▶ If your dog leaves with the toy after getting on the table, put the toy on a long cord.
- ▶ If your dog is running around the table to steal the toy, shorten the send distance, lower the table, or use ex-pens to make a chute (only use the ex-pens with a low table in case a physical reason is causing the dog to choose to run around the table).
- ▶ Do not let the dog look back to you when you send him. If he does, call him back to you and shorten the send distance.
- ▶ Work up to a 25'+ send from all sides of the table.
- ▶ Add traps like tunnels to the other side of the table. Don't make it too difficult at first; start with the trap at a reasonable distance from the table and gradually move it closer.

### ASO Training: Recall

Be clever when you train this. Think about what is happening and adjust your plan for success. Working at an 80% success rate is best: if the dog is not making "mistakes" 20% of the time, the training is not challenging the dog enough.

Place the dog in a sit in front of the table; start with about 10' between dog and table. Go to the other side of the table, about 5' past the table, turn away, and recall the dog. As he lifts onto the table, rotate back, move in toward the dog, and meet his mouth with food or a toy on the table. Have a really big party.



*Start the recall training with both you and the dog close to the table. Face the dog initially to help him brake. Have a toy in your hand and be ready for a game of tug once dog reaches the table.*



*If your dog prefers food to toys, you can meet the dog at the table with treats to help promote braking.*



*With success, gradually increase the distance between the dog and the table as well as the distance between you and the table. Also face away from the dog in a sprint stance as shown.*

## The Gentle Art of Restraint

Teaching your dog to drive away from you is essential in agility. Done correctly this exercise will build drive and develop concentration while rewarding your dog's focus on a destination.

- ▶ Start by placing the dog's dinner bowl or favorite toy about 5' in front of him.
- ▶ Place your hands on the dog's shoulders, one on each side with your fingers across the front of the chest.
- ▶ Put gentle, steady pressure on the shoulder with just the tips of your fingers (as if you are loading a spring). The instant you feel any resistance, let go.
- ▶ Do not jostle or shake or rock the dog back and forth. These are common mistakes that annoy most dogs.
- ▶ Match your voice to the steady tension; softly whisper while building to the release. I like to say *Go* or *Get It* when I let go.
- ▶ As you train, require the dog to stare at his destination.
- ▶ You are done when the dog will stare hard at his goal and pull hard into your hands. If he struggles against you, that is great.

### Recall Training Tips

- ▶ If the dog slides off the table, *do nothing, say nothing*, just start again.
- ▶ If you have two mistakes in a row, do something different. If the dog's speed is causing the failure you must manipulate his momentum by either moving the dog or yourself closer to the table. You can also decrease the difficulty for the dog by facing the dog for the recall instead of turning away from him.
- ▶ Use a helper to restrain the dog if your stay work is not solid enough for you to be able to tease the dog before releasing him. This game is not fun if you must hassle the dog about his untrained stay.
- ▶ Always run back to the dog for a game or high-value snack on the table. If he jumps off while you're running back, sorry Charlie, all bets are off! No reward, no scolding, nothing; just start over.
- ▶ If you are having a tug game to celebrate success, have a real one, not just a taste of one. Put some energy into it!
- ▶ Only work an excited dog. Stop before he loses speed, even if you get just a few reps.
- ▶ Work up to 70' feet with the table between you and your dog.

### ASO Training: Run-by

This should be a good workout for you as well as the dog. Start about 10' from the table. Try not to lead out, but if you must, take as short a lead-out as possible. I prefer to start with my hand in the dog's collar and with him standing. Asking for too many stays can put a damper on the fun. I get in position like a sprinter on the line and use a low voice and teasing tone, saying *Readyyy, Steadyyy, Go!* I race the dog to the table and keep moving past it. The dog should stick the table as I fly past.

This run-by drill will usually get the dog sliding or jumping off the table. Then you have the opportunity to help him understand the moral of the story: Hanging on to that table for dear life will be richly rewarded. Sliding or jumping off gets you nothing.



*The handler runs hard with the dog toward the table and then runs past it to see if the dog will stick the table.*



*In each of these photos, the dog understands he needs to brake and is working hard to do so.*



*In the first two photos, the dog is not making any effort to stop and is using the table as a jump. In the third photo, the dog has too much momentum and is trying to brake too late.*

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### Run-by Training Tips

- ▶ Run very hard. Race the dog.
- ▶ Only start from a stay position if you can tease and excite your dog without causing him to break. Use a helper to restrain the dog if needed.
- ▶ In the beginning you can “cheat” by quickly turning back toward the table just after passing it. If you time it just right, you can “catch” the dog just as he is jumping onto the table, before he slides off—not physically catch him, but help him stop by getting the cookie or toy into his mouth as he hits the table.
- ▶ Remember to reward back, toward the dog’s chest. Do not make the dog stretch forward for the reward and promote movement in the wrong direction. Also, a soft dog might resent this abrupt confrontation; so read your dog and remember the drills are meant to build drive, not stifle it.

## Position and Stay Work

Position and stay work are taught separately from the ASO training. Many dogs can be confused about these concepts. Let me explain: If you and I were at the gym and I said do a jumping jack, you probably would. If we were at the park, you might or might not. But if you and I were being led across a fancy restaurant to be seated, and I asked you to do a jumping jack, you most assuredly would not do it, and you would also question my sanity in asking you to do so.

Now imagine how many times you have asked your dog to down or sit when he was not within 12" of your side compared to how many times he has been rewarded for sitting within 12" of your side. Many dogs believe that they must be near their handler to do a down or a sit. If you have not systematically taught your dog that this is not the case, you can't expect him to generalize even if your last six dogs did. Also ask yourself how often you have asked him to sit or down on an object compared to how often he has been rewarded for assuming the position on the floor or ground.

No wonder dogs sometimes ask, “What? Do what? Do it where?” Just like you would if I asked for the jumping jack in the restaurant. I bet if I gave you a \$50 bill every time I asked for a jumping jack, and I rewarded compliance often in all different locations, and then I only paid if you did the jumping jack within a split second of my asking (and only if it was super-fast and high) I could get some perfect jumping jacks anywhere, anytime. Catch my drift?



*As the dog approaches the table during the sit training, notice how the handler's position and proximity to the table helps encourage the sit.*

### Position and Stay Work Training Tips

- ▶ Train the sit and down positions on other “obstacles” away from the table. Before you take the positions to the table, practice on a bed, ottoman, couch, bale of hay, benches at the park, steps up to the house, storage boxes, suitcases, and dog crates.
- ▶ Absolutely teach the dog to drop sphinx style, or elbows first rather than rear end first. This is required for braking or stopping on the table and for efficiency. Retrain your dog if your dog doesn't have this skill; you can't live without it.
- ▶ When you first introduce the sit on the table, stand very close to the table with your dog next to you in heel position. Have him jump onto the table and then say *Sit*. He will be inclined to look back and up at you, which makes the sit position easier for him.

- ▶ Be clear with your criteria regarding speed and accuracy of the sit and down.
- ▶ Perfect the release word by maintaining consistent voice inflection and not combining it with any other cue consistently, like moving every time you say the release word. Help the dog to understand the command when you take different positions and vary your distance from the dog. Remember: a stay is not a stay if it does not include a release.
- ▶ Teach your rock-solid stays away from agility; use people, places, and other dogs for distractions. Get creative!
- ▶ If you have a dog with thin hair or skin, put a very thin blanket on the table when you train. A minimal amount of padding can keep the dog from hating it.



*A thin blanket makes the table more tolerable for the thin-coated and thin-skinned dog.*

## Sit and Down while Moving

It is critical to teach the dog to do the sit and down while moving. This is a very different skill for the dog than doing a sit or down starting from a stationary position. Again, remember your friend in the restaurant?

Your dog needs a strong understanding of his verbal *Sit* and *Down* commands to perfect this. It can help if your dog has an understanding of being placed into a sit and a down with your hand in his collar, so that you can place him into position if needed. Use the run-by, recall, and send formula for training.

### Sit and Down while Moving: Run-by

Start by walking, then cue the dog to drop down or sit just as you pass him. Use your leash to gently guide the dog into position if needed. Swing in front and reward. Be sure to reward high (head up) for the sit and reward very close to the ground for the down. Work up to jogging and then running. Your job is done when your dog will drop down or sit without your slowing down. As you run by, watch him over your shoulder when you tell him to drop or sit.

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## Sit and Down while Moving: Drop on Recall

Do an 8' lead-out to start. Face your dog and call him. Give your *Down* command when he is about 12" away from you. Stepping in to him will help to stop him and put you in position to help him down gently with his collar. When you are getting a nice fast drop add a few feet at a time between you and the dog, and make your lead-out longer. Be sure to practice plenty of recalls without the drop to avoid the dog's anticipation of the drop command.

## Sit and Down while Moving: Send

If you want to go the extra mile, teach the drop on send. I do this by sending to a toy and dropping the dog on his way. Be sure to take your time and to be very patient with your dog.

## Sequencing and Classwork

When the steps are completed you can test your dog's understanding by adding the table to your sequence work. Here are some training tips:

- ▶ When a mistake happens, do not negotiate with the dog while he is on the table. If he has misunderstood his job, ask him to jump off instantly and start over. Don't drag him off; just clap your hands and encourage him to jump off.
- ▶ After two failures, have the dog do the sit or down on the ground a few times to sort out the problem. Don't go back to the table until you've solved the problem.
- ▶ Never correct the dog on the table, ever.
- ▶ If you have someone counting for you always go back and give the dog a cookie when he hears *Go*. This reward prevents him from leaving the table early in competition. He is taught to expect a cookie delivery instead of a release.

## Barking and Sniffing on the Table

Sticking with the theme of no negotiations and no corrections of any kind on the table, I handle both barking and sniffing the same way, with a very fast dismount off the table.

- ▶ Don't drag the dog off; just clap your hands and have him jump off and try again.
- ▶ Get a reward into the dog's mouth before the nose goes down or the bark comes out.
- ▶ Keep the rewards coming. Start with "paying" every second of perfect behavior, then shoot for the moon, like every 3 seconds, and so on.
- ▶ When the problem happens at a trial, you may have to remove the dog from the ring. If you are determined to live without these behaviors, it takes super-dedication.
- ▶ Do not let the dog practice behaviors that you want to extinguish—he will just get better at them.

## Trialing

In a trial I avoid hassling the dog or negotiating any behaviors. You can't risk teaching him to dislike the table in the trial environment. Just pop the dog off the table and fix the problem later. Yes, I would forfeit a Q.

Take your dog to new locations and to different tables with new smells and textures. Matches are perfect for this training.

Training a terrific table is worth taking the time to do and it can be a fun obstacle to teach. Go for it! 🐾



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*Sandy Rogers owns and operates ACE Dog Sports in San Francisco, California, and Pet Express, a worldwide, full-service pet travel agency. Since 1991, Sandy has successfully competed in obedience and agility. Her Border Collie, Brink, finished in the top five placements four times at USDAA Nationals in the Grand Prix and Steeplechase. Sheltie Sweep won the Ultimate Dog award regionally and nationally, and Rasta was the first UDX in Border Terrier breed history. All three dogs have USDAA ADCH titles in the 12", 16", and 22" categories and have won multiple USDAA Grand Prix Regionals. Contact Sandy via [www.acedogsports.com](http://www.acedogsports.com).*